

From GAY'S LETTERS *



To Swift, June 8, 1714. I am every day attending my Lord Treasurer for his bounty in order to set me out,¹ which he hath promised me upon the following petition which I sent him by Dr. Arbuthnot.²

The Epigrammatical Petition of John Gay.

I'm no more to converse with the swains³
But go where fine people resort
One can live without money on plains
But never without it at Court.

If when with the swains I did gambol
I arrayd me in silver and blue⁴
When abroad and in Courts I shall ramble
Pray, my Lord, how much money will do?

To Swift, December 22, 1722. I lodge at present in Burlington House⁵ and have received many civilities from many great men but very few real benefits. They wonder at each other for not providing for me and I wonder at 'em all. Experience has given me some knowledge of them, so that I can say that 'tis not in their power to disappoint me.

* Gay had been appointed secretary to the mission headed by Lord Clarendon which went to Hanover in the summer of 1714 in an effort to sway the Elector, George Lewis, later George I, to the Tory party. Gay had been promised 100 pounds for traveling expenses which the Lord Treasurer, Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, Gay's friend and fellow-Scriblerian ultimately paid him. ¹ Dr. John Arbuthnot, physician, man of letters, and friend to Gay, Pope, Swift; the addressee of Pope's famous *Epistle*. ² Gay's pastoral poem, *The Shepherd's Week*. ³ See the Prologue to *The Shepherd's Week*, line 40. ⁴ See p. 80, n. 33.

To Swift, February 3, 1723. As for the reigning amusement of the town, 'tis entirely musick, real fiddles, bass viols and hautboys⁶ not poetical harps, lyres, and reeds. There's nobody allow'd to say I sing but an eunuch or an Italian woman. Every body is grown now as great a judge of musick as they were in your time of poetry and folks that could not distinguish one tune from another now daily dispute about the different styles of Hendel, Bononcini, and Attilio.⁷ People have now forgot Homer and Virgil and Caesar, or at least they have lost their ranks for in London and Westminster in all polite conversations, Senesino⁸ is daily voted to be the greatest man that ever liv'd. I am oblig'd to you for your advice, as I have been formerly for your assistance in introducing me into business. I shall this year be a Commissioner of the State Lottery⁹ which will be worth to me a hundred and fifty pounds and I am not without hopes that I have friends that will think of some better and more certain provision for me.

To Mrs. Howard,¹⁰ August, 1723. I have long wish'd to be able to put in practice that valuable worldly qualification of being insincere. One of my chief reasons is that I hate to be particular and I think if a man cannot conform to the customs of the world, he is not fit to be encourag'd or to live in it. I know that if one would be agreeable to men of dignity one must study to imitate them, and I know which way they get money and places. I cannot indeed wonder that the talents requisite for a great statesman are so scarce in the world since so many of those who possess them

⁶ hautboys oboes ⁷ Bononcini, Attilio like Handel, composers of Italian Opera ⁸ Senesino a leading singer in Italian Opera ⁹ A post which Gay held from 1723-1731, his only Court appointment ¹⁰ Henrietta Howard, Maid of Honor to the Princess Caroline and mistress to the Prince of Wales (later George II), was Gay's friend at Court. There is something ludicrous about Gay's lecturing Mrs. Howard, who had grown wise in the ways of a Court, on how to get along in the world

are every month cut off in the prime of their age at the Old-Bailey. How envious are statesmen and how jealous are they of rivals! A highway-man never picks up an honest man for a companion, but if such a one accidentally falls in his way, if he cannot turn his heart, he, like a wise statesman, discards him.

To William Fortescue, September 23, 1725. I am again returned to Twickenham,¹¹ upon the news of the person's death you wrote to me about.¹² I cannot say I have any great prospect of success, but the affair remains yet undetermined and I cannot tell who will be his successor. I know I have sincerely your good wishes upon all occasions. One would think that my friends use¹³ me to disappointments to try how many I could bear. If they do so, they are mistaken, for as I don't expect much, I can never be much disappointed.

To Swift (joint letter with Pope), October 22, 1727. The Queen's family¹⁴ is at last settled and in the list, I was appointed Gentleman-Usher to the Princess Louisa, the youngest Princess, which, upon account that I am so far advanc'd in life,¹⁵ I have declin'd accepting and have endeavour'd, in the best manner I could, to make my excuses to her Majesty. So now all my expectations are vanish'd and I have no prospect but in depending wholly upon my self and my own conduct. As I am us'd to disappointments, I can bear them, but as I can have no more hopes, I can no more be disappointed, so that I am in a blessed condition. You remember you were advising me to go into Newgate to finish my scenes the more correctly¹⁶—I now

¹¹ Twickenham Pope's villa near London ¹² Gay had returned in haste to London from Wiltshire on receipt of Fortescue's news that an appointment might be available ¹³ use to expose regularly ¹⁴ Queen's family the new Queen's Court appointments ¹⁵ Gay was then forty-two ¹⁶ Swift was in England during the summer while Gay was working on *The Beggar's Opera*

think I shall, for I have no attendance to hinder me, but my Opera is already finished.

*To Edward Harley, Earl of Oxford,*¹⁷ *February 12, 1728.* I was last night to pay my duty to your Lordship and to thank you for interesting yourself in so kind a manner in my behalf. I had heard before that the King and Queen were to be present at Julius Caesar on Friday, so that my intention was to acquaint your Lordship that I had fixt on Thursday. As to the boxes on that day,¹⁸ I fear by what I have heard about the town, they are taken up already, but if your Lordship would be so good as to send a servant to the box-keeper, I hope I shall have the honour of Lady Oxford's presence in the very box she chooses, for I know Mr. Rich would upon all occasions be very glad to oblige your Lordship.

To Swift, February 15, 1728. I have deferr'd writing to you from time to time till I could give you an account of the Beggar's Opera. It is acted at the playhouse in Lincoln's Inn Fields with such success that the playhouse hath been crouded every night. To night is the fifteenth time of acting and 'tis thought it will run a fortnight longer. I have order'd Motte¹⁹ to send the play to you the first opportunity. I made no interest either for approbation or money nor hath any body been prest to take tickets for my Benefit,²⁰ notwithstanding which, I think I shall make an addition to my fortune of between six and seven hundred pounds. I know this account will give you pleasure, as

¹⁷ Son of the Lord Treasurer, Gay's early friend ¹⁸ boxes . . . that day box seats at the Theatre Royal for *The Beggar's Opera*. As is the case with a "smash" hit, tickets for *The Beggar's Opera* were hard to come by. The play's appeal was such that even royalty could not resist—the King and Queen attended a performance on February 22, 1728 ¹⁹ Swift's publisher ²⁰ Benefit during the run of a successful play, special performances were held, on designated nights, for the author's benefit

I have push'd through this precarious affair without servility or flattery. As to any favours from great men, I am in the same state you left me, but I am a great deal happier as I have no expectations. . . . Lord Cobham says that I should have printed it [*The Beggar's Opera*] in Italian over against the English, that the ladys might have understood what they read. The outlandish (as they now call it) Opera hath been so thin²¹ of late that some have call'd that the Beggar's Opera and if the run continues, I fear I shall have remonstrances drawn up against me by the Royal Academy of Musick.²²

To Swift, March 20, 1728. The Beggar's Opera hath now been acted thirty six times and was as full the last night as the first and as yet, there is not the least probability of a thin audience, though there is a discourse about the town that the Directors of the Royal Academy of Musick design to solicit against its being play'd on the outlandish Opera days, as it is now call'd. On the Benefit day of one of the actresses last week, one of the players falling sick, they were oblig'd to give out²³ another play or dismiss the audience. A play was given out but the people call'd out for the Beggar's Opera and they were forc'd to play it or the audience would not have stay'd. I have got, by all this success, between seven and eight hundred pounds and Rich (deducting the whole charges of the house) hath clear'd already near four thousand pounds. . . . There is a mezzo-tinto²⁴ print publish'd to day of Polly, the heroine of the Beggar's Opera, who was before unknown and is now in so high vogue, that I am in doubt whether her fame does not surpass that of the Opera itself.²⁵

²¹ thin poorly attended ²² The Royal Academy sponsored the Italian Opera ²³ give out schedule or announce ²⁴ mezzotint engraving ²⁵ Lavinia Fenton, the actress who played Polly Peachum, was the rage of London during the winter and spring of 1728. In the role of Polly, her charms caught the eye of the Duke of Bolton who ultimately made her his Duchess

To Swift, May 16, 1728. The Beggar's Opera is acted here²⁶ but our Polly here hath got no fame, but the actors have got money. I have sent by Dr. Delany, the Opera, Polly Peachum, and Captain Macheath.²⁷ I would have sent you my own head²⁸ which is now graving to make up the gang, but it is not yet finish'd. I suppose you must have heard that I have had the honour to have had a sermon preach'd against my works by a Court chaplain, which I look upon as no small addition to my fame.²⁹

To Swift, December 2, 1728. I have been confin'd about ten days but never to my bed, so that I hope soon to get abroad about my business, which is, the care of the second part of the Beggar's Opera³⁰ which was almost ready for rehearsal. But Rich receiv'd the Duke of Grafton's³¹ commands (upon an information he was rehearsing a play improper to be represented) not to rehearse any new play whatever 'till his Grace hath seen it. What will become of it, I know not but I am sure I have written nothing that can be legally suppress, unless the setting vices in general in an odious light and virtue in an amiable one may give offence.

To Swift, March 18, 1729. You must undoubtedly have heard that the Duchess³² took up my defense with the King and Queen in the cause of my play and that she hath been forbid the Court for interesting

²⁶ Gay was writing from Bath, the famous eighteenth-century resort ²⁷ Opera . . . Macheath a copy of the play and engravings of Polly and Macheath ²⁸ my own head an engraving of himself ²⁹ In March, Dr. Thomas Herring, the King's Chaplain, delivered a sermon in Lincoln's Inn Chapel condemning *The Beggar's Opera* for presenting crime in a favorable light. Swift wrote a defense of Gay for the *Dublin Intelligencer*, May 25, 1728, "A Vindication of Mr. Gay and *The Beggar's Opera*" ³⁰ *Polly*, written as a sequel to *The Beggar's Opera* ³¹ The Lord Chamberlain who served as the Royal censor. Ten days later, the Duke, no doubt on Walpole's prompting, banned the production of *Polly* ³² The Duchess of Queensberry

herself to increase my fortune for the publication of it without being acted. The Duke too hath given up his employment³³ which he would have done if the Duchess had not met this treatment, upon account of ill usage from the Ministers but this hasten'd him in what he had determin'd. The play is now almost printed with the musick, words, and basses engrav'd on 31 copper plates which, by my friend's assistance, hath a probability to turn greatly to my advantage.³⁴ . . . For writing in the cause of virtue and against the fashionable vices, I am look'd upon at present as the most obnoxious person almost in England.

To Swift, November 9, 1729. Next week I believe I shall be in town, not at Whitehall for those lodgings were judg'd not convenient for me and dispos'd of.³⁵ . . . You have often twitted me in the teeth with hankering after the Court. In that you mistook me, for I know by experience that there is no dependence that can be sure but a dependence upon ones-self.

³³ employment his Royal appointments ³⁴ In its printed form, *Polly* brought Gay some 1200 pounds, more than he could have hoped for had the play been produced ³⁵ Because of *Polly*, Gay was dispossessed of the apartment at Whitehall to which he was entitled as Commissioner of the Lottery

On the cover is reproduced an engraving by William Blake, which was published in 1790 after a picture by William Hogarth (1697-1764). The scene is from Act III of *The Beggar's Opera*. Polly, seen singing the song "When my Hero in Court Appears," is the daughter of Peachum, a receiver of stolen goods, who is furious at her marrying the highwayman Macheath, and informs against him. Macheath is brought to Newgate Prison, where he conquers the heart of Lucy, whose father, Locket, is the warder. From left to right in the engraving are Lucy, Locket, Macheath, Polly and Peachum. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Research for cover art by Nigel Foxell